



Title: The right to food in theory and practice...

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# Rural women and the right to food

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed the essential dignity and integrity of all human beings. Yet in far too many cases, women's rights are more limited than those of men. The situation is particularly difficult for rural women who are often denied the most basic economic and social rights to own property, to find decent work and to have an education and good health.

Without these basic rights, it is difficult for rural women to develop their own capacities fully and make a decent living as agriculturists, entrepreneurs or wage earners.

There is an age-old idea that women's rights should be secondary to men's because men are the main breadwinners and leaders of society. But the world is changing. Globalization and other economic and social forces are affecting the rural landscape in new and profound ways, changing the economic reality of people's situations and, consequently, the social structure. Most rural economies are becoming more heavily cash-oriented than in the past, putting pressure on rural households to have higher cash incomes. This need for cash is felt by both men and women and has pushed many women into income-generating activities or wage labour so that they can buy food and other essentials.

Migration, increasingly high separation and divorce rates, war and AIDS are also increasing the



*Village women in Indonesia at a meeting with an extension officer*

Technical training and extension aimed at women help them to realize their potential as providers of family food and income.

numbers of female-headed rural households worldwide. This leaves women with total responsibility for earning a living and raising, feeding and educating young children. Although female-headed households are increasing in almost all regions, the situation is most dramatic in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean where women head approximately 30 percent of rural households. In many Southern African countries, they almost completely dominate the traditional farming sector.<sup>6</sup>

## Women's role in food security

FAO believes that assuring women's human rights is a precondition for a just and humane society. It is also a key strategy in assuring food security for all. This is because people's overall access to food is very dependent on the work of rural women. FAO makes a rough estimate that women produce more than 50 percent of the food grown worldwide.<sup>7</sup> Some rural women are farmers on their own account, mainly growing food for family consumption. But the majority of rural women work as "invisible" field hands on family plots. They carry out essential work such as hoeing, planting, weeding and harvesting with simple tools and little outside assistance. This often means that women have no recognized independent status as farmers and their work is considered as secondary within both the family and society.

The numbers tell a different story however. In sub-Saharan Africa, women contribute roughly 60 to 80 percent of labour in food production, both for household consumption and for sale. In Asia, women account for approximately 50 percent of overall regional food production.<sup>8</sup> In South and Southeast Asia, women play a major role in rice production, generally providing the unpaid family or wage labour needed for sowing, transplanting, harvesting and processing. Throughout the Pacific, women play prominent roles in food marketing and in fisheries. In Latin America, although the workforce in agriculture is declining overall, women still contribute 40 percent of the agricultural supply to the internal market and women's gardens and agricultural plots often constitute the only means of diversifying the

family's diet.<sup>9</sup>

## THE LAST TO EAT

**In many societies, tradition dictates that the men eat first and receive the best food. When food is scarce, this often means that women and children go without. Thus, women in the developing world are more likely to be undernourished than men. Closely spaced pregnancies also take their toll, leading in many cases to anaemia, a major cause of maternal mortality.**

Women's active involvement in agriculture usually translates into a heavy workload. Poor rural women can work as many as 16 to 18 hours per day, doing fieldwork as well as handling all their domestic responsibilities. This heavy workload can have a negative affect not only on women's own health but on family nutrition as well.

For example, participatory rural appraisals carried out under a food security and nutrition project in the Luapula Valley of Zambia found that women's work burden is the biggest constraint to household food security in the project area.<sup>10</sup> Poor rural women simply do not have enough time during the day to do everything - work in their fields, which are often distant from their homes, collect water and fuelwood, prepare meals and care for the sick and the elderly. Women have no choice but to cut back on cooked meals and introduce shortcuts in food preparation which have a negative impact on children's nutrition and the overall food security of the household.

## WOMEN'S RIGHT TO CREDIT

**The Interregional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation and Development promotes people's participation in the conservation of upland watersheds in five countries. Early on, the project staff realized that they needed to help people solve their economic problems before they could think about management and conservation of the environment. In Tunisia, one focus of the project has thus been to provide credit and training, especially for women, in order to create employment and improve family income in the Oued Sbaihya watershed. Given that none of the participating women had ever had access to credit before, the microcredit scheme allowed them to expand**

their poultry farming and beekeeping activities.

In the words of Mbarka Bent Hammadi Aguil: "My project works well and I earn enough, both with the hens that I have bought thanks to the credit and the ones I had before. Every day some money comes in. I will now buy a lamb, which I am going to fatten in order to sell it for the next religious feast for not less than three times the price I paid for it. I have given some money to my father to let him buy land. I have been able to go to Tunis to visit my brother at the hospital. If it wasn't for the expenses to help my family, I could save a lot and invest more. But my project is meant, in part, to help my family."

One part of the project strategy is to carry out nutrition education and awareness raising in the communities to convince men to take on more responsibility for reproductive tasks such as child care and food preparation. The other part is to support the women's productive activities by providing training, credit and access to improved and appropriate technology to reduce the drudgery of their tasks.



*Monthly payments are deposited as part of a lease purchase credit scheme in Zambia*

Most rural economies are becoming more heavily cash-oriented.

## The right to land and other resources

If rural women are to reach their potential as providers of food and income for their families, they must have rights to the means of production. In most traditional societies, a woman's status within the farming household is almost always derived from her relationship to males within the household (as mother, wife or daughter).

Thus, women seldom have individual rights to land, water and other resources that are necessary for raising the productivity of their agricultural activity. In many countries, laws limit women's ability to own property and participate fully in development. In others, legislation has affirmed women's basic right to own land and other resources but customary practices and laws effectively limit its application.

Why are women's rights to land so important? As a group of landless women in India replied in answer to a query from development workers about whether they wanted better houses: "We want (arable) land, all the rest is humbug." Land is not only the most basic agricultural input but ownership of and control over land are also crucial

determinants in whether a farmer has access to other resources and participates in local decision-making processes. For example, without landownership as collateral, women farmers and entrepreneurs have little access to institutional sources of credit. They are rarely considered as clientele for agricultural research and development programmes or users of improved technologies. Technical training and extension programmes overlook them because they are not considered primary producers.

## ELIMINATING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

The need to recognize a range of complementary rights to improve rural women's access to food, health, education, training and opportunities for employment has been outlined in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW is the most important United Nations convention dedicated to women's rights. As of 1997, 153 states had ratified or adhered to the Convention. In a special article on the problems of rural women (Article 14), CEDAW asks States Parties to ensure that rural women have the right to:

- agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform and resettlement schemes;
- training, education and extension services in order to increase their technical efficiency;
- participation in development planning at all levels;
- organization of self-help groups and cooperatives;
- access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning.

## The need for other basic rights

There is, of course, a strong linkage between the right to food and other fundamental human rights. For poor rural women, the rights to education, knowledge and employment are prerequisites for assuring their own food security and that of their families. Women have far less access to education and information than men. According to global studies, only 58 percent of women in developing countries can read and write, compared with 79 percent of men.

Yet, when rural women are asked what is the single most important form of assistance they need, they

most often answer that they want training in agricultural techniques, literacy or business skills. Rural women thus recognize that education and training are the primary stepping stones to being able to improve their lives.

Wage-earning opportunities and formal employment are becoming increasingly important to rural women, but steady jobs are scarce and women's employment rights not adequately protected. Where they do find employment, female wage workers are generally concentrated in low-status, low-skill and low-paid jobs with long hours and poor working conditions. With only a few exceptions, women tend to be paid less than men are. For women with formal jobs, the right to organize is important. But there are few trade unions or other formal organizations that truly represent rural women's interests and respond to their needs.

<sup>6</sup> FAO. 1995. *Women, agriculture and rural development: a synthesis report of the Africa region*. Rome; FAO. 1998. *Rural women and food security: current situation and perspectives*. Rome.

<sup>7</sup> FAO. 1995. *A fairer future for rural women*. Rome.

<sup>8</sup> These figures were taken from recent FAO publications, including FAO, 1998 and a recent series of Statistical Profiles on Women prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

<sup>9</sup> FAO, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Sontheimer, S. 1997. Consultant's mission report to GCP/ZAM/052/BEL - Improving Nutrition and Food Security in the Luapula Valley, Zambia. FAO.